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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN GOVERNMENT WALKS A TIGHT ROPE ON GMOS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A draft law that would bring Bulgaria's current restrictive biotechnology regime into EU compliance has been seized upon by anti-GMO groups. As a result, as a tactical response, the government is proposing, as a supplement to the draft law, a five-year moratorium on releasing GMO products into the environment or for farming purposes. The government expects that once the new legislation is passed, the European Commission will view the moratorium as a delay in the implementation of the law and Bulgaria will be forced to lift it or face sanctions, something the cash-strapped government is keen to avoid. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The current law on GMOs, passed in 2005, has some of the most restrictive biotechnology legislation in Europe. Bulgarian law bans almost all forms of biotech field experiments on crops such as rose, tobacco, vine, all vegetables, and wheat. The law is not in compliance with two European directives concerning contained use or laboratory work and field trials and commercial growing. To bring Bulgaria into EU compliance, the Ministry of Environment and Water proposed a draft law that introduces the EU principle of case-by-case and science-based approaches for field trials, and removes the bans, as well as the 30 kilometer buffer zone surrounding the field trials.

¶3. (SBU) The Bulgarian Green Movement and other opponents of biotechnology immediately launched a campaign against the draft law. Under heavy pressure to amend the draft legislation, the current government suggested adding a five-year moratorium for releasing GMO products into the environment or for farming purposes. Minister of Agriculture Miroslav Naydenov admitted in a meeting with Ambassador February 11 that this moratorium is a tactical approach in order to achieve the strategic goal of passing the draft law. He expected that once the new legislation is passed, the European Commission would view the moratorium as a delay in the implementation of the law and Bulgaria would be forced to lift it. In Naydenov's view, it would be easier to lift a moratorium under pressure from the EC than to change the legislation.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Thanks to an aggressive, well-organized and funded green movement, GMOs have been turned into Bulgaria's new four-letter word. The government is walking a tight rope. Faced with severe penalties if EU legislation is not brought into compliance on one hand, and an alarmed public that has bought into anti-GMO rhetoric on the other, the government is trying to find middle ground. If Naydenov is correct, and the EC ultimately forces Bulgaria to lift the proposed moratorium, the government will have the excuse it needs to finally liberalize Bulgaria's biotech regime. But it will be a tough fight.

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